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### Md. Assembly Scholarships Unrestricted; [FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (1288 words)

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PUBLISHED CORRECTIONS: A March 28 article incorrectly stated the amount of money that Maryland state senators are allowed to give in scholarship money each year. They are allotted \$138,000 each, not \$158,000. (Published 4/1/2005)

Megan Nossel needed some extra cash for college a few years back, so she applied for a long list of scholarships.

She learned that her family, while not wealthy, did not qualify for much need-based aid. But there was one scholarship source that proved reliable: her aunt, Maryland Sen. Katherine A. Klausmeier.

Nossel received two semesters' worth of taxpayer-funded scholarships from Klausmeier (D-Baltimore County) -- \$1,000 in state money doled out at the sole discretion of the senator's office.

A review of state records shows that Nossel, also a contributor to Klausmeier's reelection campaign, was hardly alone in receiving scholarships from a sympathetic lawmaker. Nor was she breaking the rules: Although state law recommends that the \$11.3 million available each year for legislative scholarships go to those with demonstrated financial need, lawmakers are not required to follow that recommendation.

There is little to stop lawmakers from giving scholarships to campaign workers, relatives and friends as a way of compensating them for campaign work or ensuring constituent loyalty. During the more than 100 years the scholarship program has been in place -- a legislative perquisite unlike any other in the nation -- examples of nepotism and favoritism have often prompted critics to urge an end to the practice.

Now with Maryland college tuition spiraling and the pool of financial-aid money shrinking, a two-pronged effort is underway to end legislators' ability to grant scholarships with virtually no oversight. In his budget, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) has proposed moving the money to a state commission that grants scholarships based on objective criteria. Two bills pending in the state Senate would do essentially the same.

"It's appalling that state funds can be doled out based on who knows who, not necessarily who has the best grades or who has the most financial need," said James Browning, executive director of Common Cause/Maryland. "If a student who pays 50 bucks to get into a fundraiser and say hello and [therefore] has a leg up, then the whole system is corrupt."

For years, legislators have jealously guarded the program, arguing that senators and delegates understand their constituencies better than a state bureaucracy and can fill urgent needs that a more objective system might overlook.

"We take the best, the brightest that are going into the field," said Sen. Paula C. Hollinger (D-Baltimore County), a nurse who supports the legislative scholarships and gives her money to nursing students to help reverse a shortage in the field. "I do think it's important that financial need isn't the only" criterion, she said.

This year, three lawmakers submitted bills to end the program. Two have stalled in the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, which Hollinger chairs, and the third was voted down in another committee. Hollinger would not say whether she would allow the bills to come to a vote before the session ends April 11.

Legislators receive a pool of money each year -- \$158,000 for each senator and about \$31,000 for each

delegate -- that they can dole out essentially as they see fit. The state mandates that recipients must be Maryland residents and receive no more than \$2,000 a semester from any one lawmaker.

Eight of Maryland's 47 senators and 21 of its 141 delegates regularly hand the money back to the state to determine how to disburse it. The rest decide for themselves who receives the awards, sometimes with input from committees.

A 1992 study by Common Cause/Maryland found that 1,200 of about 7,000 scholarships went to students with no demonstrated financial need. Although the Maryland Higher Education Commission would not provide detailed data on more recent scholarship recipients, the office released aggregate data showing that nearly 30 percent of legislative scholarships awarded last year went to students whose household incomes were more than \$80,000 a year.

A Washington Post analysis of those scholarships showed several clear examples of campaign contributors receiving awards and dozens more probable cases of favoritism by both Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

The commission, in response to a Public Information Act request, provided a complete list of scholarship recipients and the lawmakers from whom they received the money. By cross-referencing the list with a database of campaign contributors, the Washington Post identified dozens of probable matches, some of them confirmed by phone calls.

Nossel, a nursing student who received scholarships from Klausmeier, graduated in May from Villa Julie College in Stevenson, just outside Baltimore.

She said she worked two jobs in college and sought scholarships from various sources before receiving two \$500 grants from Klausmeier's office. Nossel contributed a total of \$65 to Klausmeier in 2001 and 2003, according to state records. Nossel family members, who live in Baltimore County, contributed more than \$1,000 during that time, records show.

Klausmeier said in an interview that Nossel "works hard and deserves it."

"There's nothing saying that she can't" receive a scholarship, Klausmeier said.

Benjamin Pulz, a second-year law student at the University of Maryland, received several years' worth of scholarships from Sen. Philip C. Jimeno (D-Anne Arundel). His father, Stanley Pulz, has contributed at least \$200 to Jimeno since 1999. His company, SPA Inc., contributed \$475 between 2000 and 2004, records show.

"I've been fortunate enough to make enough money so that we as a family couldn't qualify for a lot of other scholarships, so that was the only other way out," Stanley Pulz said in an interview. "It helped [Ben] get through school."

Jimeno said that Stanley Pulz is "a personal friend" who has attended his fundraising events for years.

"I have no apologies and no regrets," Jimeno said. "The fact that [Pulz] contributes does not exclude his children."

Jimeno said a committee of his staff members determines who receives the awards based on recommendations from high-school guidance counselors. The counselors rate each applicant according to grade-point average, financial need and extracurricular activities.

"It's fair," Jimeno said. "Every student has an opportunity."

Critics say that with the limited amount of state money available for students who need help, arbitrary scholarships exclude those who truly need the aid.

"It's a relic of the political spoils system," said Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), a Montgomery County Council



member who headed Common Cause/Maryland when it did a detailed study of scholarship program in 1992. "It protects incumbents from competition. Over a long Senate career, a senator can literally award hundreds of scholarships to constituents, and that's remembered at election time."

Sen. James Brochin (D-Baltimore County) called the legislative scholarships a "disgrace" and "inherently unfair and wrong" at a recent hearing on his bill, which would end the program.

"This isn't our money. It's the taxpayers'," Brochin said. "People shouldn't be voting for us because they got a legislative scholarship."

Two days later, Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden (D-Baltimore) stood on the Senate floor and called Brochin's comments offensive.

"I think we really need to be careful," McFadden said, "We're not in keeping with the collegial atmosphere of this body."

The remarks were a rare rebuke of a colleague on the Senate floor, but the sentiment was not unusual.

"There's a lot of feeling of not wanting to change," said Sen. Sandra B. Schrader (R-Howard), sponsor of a bill that would take 70 percent of the money now given to legislators and give it to the state scholarship board to allocate. "I think there are some [senators] who believe in their heart of hearts that they want to make sure that people who really need the money are able to get it."

Research database editor Derek Willis contributed to this report.

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